

Maternal Thinking in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*: an analysis of impossibility

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ABSTRACT

The paper develops around the notion of motherhood in Doris Lessing's seminal novel The Golden Notebook. Starting from the premise of Lessing's persistent refusal of the label of feminist writer, but theoretically sustained through an elaboration of her stance on the novel's readership, the main argument of the paper emphasises Lessing's (semantic) accordance with the feminist motherhood theory of the early sixties. In addition, through the notion of motherhood, the article aims to provide an account respectful towards Lessing's request for a complex and coherent reading of her work.

KEYWORDS

Doris Lessing, feminist motherhood, motherhood, *The Golden Notebook*

Reading as (if one is) Doris Lessing

In the 1971 Preface of *The Golden Notebook*, first published in 1962, Doris Lessing observed in hindsight that the book had been instantly accepted “as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war.”¹ Lessing had shown a female protagonist dealing with historically-situated conflicts between artistic creativity, political involvement, family, work, sexual freedom, motherhood, economic oppression, and intellectual independence. The *novel* was tremendously attractive to its second-wave feminist readers. Many women readers raised in the sixties and seventies later acknowledged their enormous indebtedness to Lessing. In her influential book *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*, for example, Gayle Greene describes her own reading of *The Golden Notebook* “as a transforming experience, a touchstone for my generation. It certainly changed my life; Lessing and de Beauvoir made me a ‘feminist.’”² Many other similar testimonies can be found elsewhere in the literature of the last few decades.

However, Lessing herself did not ever regard *The Golden Notebook* as a feminist book. In one of the central passages of her 1971 Preface, she writes:

But this novel was not a trumpet for Women's Liberation [...] Some books are not read in the right way because they have skipped a stage of opinion, assume a crystallisation of information in society which has not yet taken place. This book was written as if the attitudes that have been created by the Women's Liberation movements already existed. It came out first ten years ago, in 1962. If it were coming out now for the first time, it might be read, and not merely reacted to: things have changed very fast.³

1 Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London and New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), 8.

2 Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 57.

3 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 8–9.

These words of her Preface would later be analysed over and over again. Taking a very schematic view of the history of these interpretations and their long-term modifications, the persistence of specific themes and forms of problematization can be noted, with many shifts in analytic emphases closely related to the general trends of 20th and 21st-century literary theory studies. In that sense, the most active focus of interpretation has been on the interest shown in questions that elaborate tensions between author, authority and intention as well as reader and reception. It should be noted that, for the most part, these tensions undoubtedly resulted from the complex layers of doubling in the 1971 Preface, namely author/reader doubling: Doris Lessing as the author, and as a reader.

The reason for this lies in the following: the Preface contains Lessing's own reading and interpretation of the novel, with these reading and interpretative positions quite explicitly emphasized. As her own commentaries on the novel express, she clearly preferred a historical-contextualized interpretation as most suitable. This is the most usual traditional hermeneutical approach, tying text to context. Departing from this theoretical stance, literary interpretation has generally insisted on the importance ascribed (in)to specific contextual (historical or cultural) qualities of a literary text. The context, therefore, provides the conditions necessary for understanding the significance of the text. Nevertheless, a set of epistemological issues remain unsolved if the described theoretical standards are being employed. For example, how can one understand a text that is historically or culturally strange to its readers? What happens when the text travels from one historical or cultural context to another? These dilemmas occupied much of Lessing's 1971 Preface.

One of her aims in *The Golden Notebook* was to provide readers with an impression of Britain's intellectual and moral climate in the mid-twentieth century, a goal accomplished by using themes that seemed to Lessing to signify post-war Britain. However, as she explains further, "handing the manuscript to publisher and friends, I learned that I had written a track about the sex war, and fast discovered that nothing I said then could change that diagnosis."⁴ In other words, as Lessing conceded, subsequent misunderstanding and misinterpretation have not been accidents, but the most likely course of events in the ensuing years of reading the text: the aim for readers was less to understand the text than to understand themselves and the preoccupations of their milieu through the text.

How is Lessing's remark to be understood? Does it mean that the proper signification of the text is solely that which had been intended initially? Is what follows from this premise that proper reading requires rejecting distant readings as anachronisms and restoring the original context? Does it mean, moreover, that following this principle, the reconstruction of the author's intention is necessary for a true understanding of the text? Because, as Alice Ridout observes, "Lessing's preface is in danger of doing exactly this: implying that the only critic who can truly understand *The Golden Notebook* is herself."⁵ Summarized in this way, Doris Lessing may well represent the firmest possible philological position: rigorously identifying the meaning of the text with its original context and authorial intention, although this might be a *somewhat oversimplified conclusion*. Namely, Lessing does appear to imply that readers of *the novel* had generally failed according to criteria she sought to establish as relevant. In addition, many Lessing scholars such

4 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 10.

5 Alice Ridout, *Contemporary Women Writers Look Back: From Irony to Nostalgia* (London: Continuum, 2011), 64.

as Alice Ridout, emphasize Lessing's "attempts to control the reception of *The Golden Notebook*."⁶ Nevertheless, to speak of Lessing's conception of a reader or reading as a singular category begs the question of what other notions have been represented through these concepts in her Preface. In its last section, Lessing acknowledges her fascination with the question "of what people see when they read a book, and why one person sees one pattern and nothing at all of another pattern."⁷

Moreover, as Sophia Barnes reminds us, Doris Lessing "may contemplate 'how odd it is to have, as author, such a clear picture of a book, that is seen so very differently by its readers,'" but Lessing "nonetheless emphatically concludes that it is precisely this heterogeneity of reception which keeps the book 'alive and potent and fructifying'"⁸ Therefore, it may be assumed from Lessing's conclusion that her authorial intention is not the only possible position for reading, and there is no such reader who does not actualize the significations of a text.

Ten years after I wrote it [*The Golden Notebook*], I can get, in one week, three letters about it, from three intelligent, well-informed, concerned people ... But one letter is entirely about the sex war, about man's inhumanity to woman, and woman's inhumanity to man, and the writer has produced pages and pages all about nothing else, for she — but not always a she, can't see anything else in the book.

The second is about politics, probably from an old Red like myself, and he or she writes many pages about politics, and never mentions any other theme.

These two letters used, when the book was as it were young, to be the most common.

The third letter, once rare but now catching up on the others, is written by a man or a woman who can see nothing in it but the theme of mental illness.

But it is the same book.⁹

Put differently, in Sophia Barnes's words: "What kinds of readers does Lessing want us to be?"¹⁰ According to Barnes, these are the questions that cannot be answered without also considering Lessing's consistent "resistance to the authority invested in professional academic criticism" and "the celebration of multifarious individualistic and non-instrumental approaches to readership which is not only explicitly articulated in 1971 Preface to *The Golden Notebook* but also made implicit in the novel's structure."¹¹ In the Preface, Lessing invites the readers to move away from collective norms, beliefs, values and the powerful impact of institutional authorities that generate these "literary" readers whose reception of the novel she discusses; without this process, readings always remain passive, uncritical and unindividual.¹²

6 Tonya Krouse, "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: Positioning *The Golden Notebook* in the Twentieth-Century Canon," in *Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook After Fifty*, ed. Alice Ridout, Roberta Rubenstein, and Sandra Siner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 115.

7 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 12.

8 Sophia Barnes, "Readers of Fiction and Reader in Fiction: Readership and *The Golden Notebook*," in *Doris Lessing and the Forming of History*, ed. Kevin Brazil, David Sergeant and Tom Sperlinger (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 71–84.

9 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 25.

10 Barnes, "Readers of Fiction and Reader in Fiction," 70.

11 Barnes, "Readers of Fiction and Reader in Fiction," 71.

12 Barnes, "Readers of Fiction and Reader in Fiction," 71.

The fact is that often critics use Lessing's words to emphasize that she consistently refused "to follow a prescribed line, or to become a spokesperson for any kind of movement."¹³ Barnes in her analyses took up this widespread notion to analyse Lessing's view on reading, and it seems to her that "Lessing's relationship to the project of Women's Liberation and an emergent second-wave feminism cannot be decoupled from that movement's emphasis on reading as an inherently political activity, undertaken to share experience and inform action."¹⁴ Within this particular conception of feminist readership, the author is responsible to his/her readers in a very special way: "a kind of figurehead for the collective with a specific political function" and thus, as Sophia Barnes declares, "[m]uch of Lessing's resistance to her status as a forerunner of the 'sex war' stemmed not from any objection to the project of Women's Liberation [...] but from her frustration with the reductive nature of such a reading."¹⁵

Barnes's reading of Lessing's 1971 Preface is unquestionably appealing, maybe excessively so. It offers an analysis of Lessing's views on reading and reader and it seems to reconcile tensions between author, authority and intention and reader and reception. Lessing's Preface has been describes as a text that has surprising liberating power. As mentioned, Doris Lessing uses doubling narrative patterns, which, as shown by Claire Sprague, are characteristic not only of the 1971 Preface but of the novel itself.¹⁶ Lessing's auto-authorization – to read her novel as if she is a common reader – destabilizes the authority invested in the author. Accordingly, another set of problems arises in regard to whether her reading should be taken as a voice of authority. Nevertheless, as the Preface and the entire novel constantly open up new blind spots, the author's authority diverges from the question of the author's responsibility towards (her) readers, with the feminist readership emerging as a point of contention. These types of questions have been extensively analysed by Alice Ridout,¹⁷ who has long considered the significance of Lessing's rejection of feminist readership. The forthcoming analysis also does not deal directly with this provocative issue either; but is focused on one particular pattern represented in the novel. More specifically, this analysis intends to track the pattern of motherhood, and it employs a methodological apparatus used in feminist motherhood theory.

The chosen methodology stems from Lessing's request to take into account the mutual interrelatedness of parts of the novel in the reading process. The notion of motherhood as a net of complex connections directs analysis towards inter-relatedness as a guiding reading principle. As fundamentally relational, motherhood is posited as a paradigmatic notion by which the desire for "totality" of reception can be met. Furthermore, besides the fundamental relation of the mother and the child, the "ecosystem" of motherhood is highly receptive to contextual influences affecting each of the actors and the agency itself in various ways. To a large extent, these features of the notion of motherhood are elaborated in distinct theoretical endeavors of feminist motherhood.

13 Ruth Whittaker, *Doris Lessing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 9.

14 Barnes, "Readers of Fiction and Reader in Fiction," 80.

15 Barnes, "Readers of Fiction and Reader in Fiction," 80.

16 Claire Sprague, *Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

17 Ridout, *Contemporary Women Writers Look Back*, 47–69.

Motherhood in Feminist Theory

Before elaborating on the theoretical and methodological set of premises, the problematical notion of motherhood within feminist thought must be elucidated. The theoretical unease towards the theme of motherhood emerges from the earliest stages of feminist writing. Starting from the proto-feminist period, during which the equal mental capacity of male and female human beings was emphasized and women's corporeality was avoided, all the way to the canonic *The Second Sex*, the matrophobic (somatophobic) thread of feminist thought has continued in different forms up to the present time. Although today the theme of motherhood does not have the negative or radical impression, a much contemporary feminist (academic) thought does not significantly address this theme. In her article "Is motherhood an unfinished work of feminism?" Amy Westervelt calculates that the theme of motherhood "comes up in fewer than 3% of papers, journal articles, or textbooks on modern gender theory."¹⁸

Taking into consideration major theoretical shifts and developments in feminist theory during the last few decades, issues of motherhood have become even more challenging to address. The ever-present risk of gender essentialism is immanent to the theorization of motherhood, as are the various intersectional or standpoint problem clusters arising from motherhood conceived as an experience.

Almost in parallel with the skeptical trend regarding motherhood in feminist writing, another facet of the same thought matrix has emerged. This second trend characterizes a much more affirmative stance towards motherhood, as is evident in the work of, for example, Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, Nancy Chodorow and Andrea O'Reilly, among many other authors. In the volume *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*, Gill Rye et al. (re-)affirm motherhood studies as "a discipline in its own right,"¹⁹ denoting an ever-growing interest in the subject.

Comparable to the basic feminist conceptual divide with regard to motherhood as presented up to now, Elaine Tuttle Hansen follows the chronological placement of feminist thinking about motherhood with her own "three-wave" overview. According to Tuttle Hansen, the first period ending in the 1970s was characterized by the repudiation of motherhood. The second period began in the 1970s, lasting approximately until the mid-nineties, was marked by reclaiming the notion of motherhood and its re-inscription in favorable terms within feminist thought. Continuing at present, the third phase is distinguished from the two previous periods by an epistemological insecurity (impasse) within feminist theory on motherhood.²⁰

The analytical impasse according to Elaine Tuttle Hansen might be mitigated by "taking into feminist account—rather than just blaming or accepting—either 'bad' mothers, or what we might call 'metaphorical,' nontraditional, nonbiological, maybe even nongendered mothers."²¹ It

18 Amy Westervelt, "Is motherhood an unfinished work of feminism?," *The Guardian*, May 26, 2018, available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/26/is-motherhood-the-unfinished-work-of-feminism>>.

19 Gill Rye et al., ed. *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 3.

20 Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (Berkley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1997).

21 Hansen, *Mother Without Child*, 9.

should be noted that feminist discourse on motherhood has moved significantly in the direction sketched by Tuttle Hansen.²² Studies of “bad mothers” or motherhood/mothering on the edges not only represent a strain of thematic vitalism within a respected field of research, but also indicate the plethora of possibilities which discourses on motherhood can acquire outside of clear-cut perimeters.

This way of perceiving motherhood from diverse (real and theoretical) perspectives without employing patterned or standardized value-laden motherhood scales, an approach which can be labelled “inclusive motherhood thinking,” is the starting point of this paper. Furthermore, the maternal experience here discussed belongs to the realm of the literary text, a “possible” world, the experientiality of which is hermeneutically limited, with all analyses closely related to the notion of representation. The conventional meaning of the term representation implies creating signs that stand for something else, thus the intrinsically dualistic nature is evident in mimetics or the (asymmetric) relationship between the “real” and the “represented.”

Still, numerous insights have shown the *sui generis* nature of the literary work subjected exclusively to its own intrinsic regulations but not to mimetic conformity assessments. Nevertheless, especially in its first stages feminist literary theory accentuated the literary communication component, emphasizing the interpretative specificity of (represented) female characters, (represented) female experience, and the (alleged) female recipients' particular position. These insights relate to and rely on the extra-literary experiences some women might share within their everyday practices/existences, such as motherhood. In addition, another meaning of the term representation relates to its political aspect.

Political (emancipatory) or activist intention stands out as an inevitable feature of feminist (literary) analyses. In that respect, the tangent sections of the meanings of the term representation form an epistemological milieu of shifting indicators pointing to intertangled aspects of the term motherhood as represented and as a representation of motherhood in the novel in question. Building on Rey Chow's account of the shift in focal problems regarding political representation in comparison to gender-related topics in the case of aesthetical representations,²³ the present analysis engages in an inquiry of *The Golden Notebook* directed by the following series of questions: What underlying assumptions on motherhood are present in the novel? How does the represented content correspond with the then conventional understanding of motherhood?

In this context, it is worth recalling the various iterations of the feminist script dealing with motherhood. From a feminist perspective, the image of motherhood as a practice harmful and burdensome to women was prevalent in the time frame of the novel's creation. On the other hand, the broader context implied a completely different picture of motherhood. These facts point to the fundamental feminist theoretical insight on the subject, expressed in the form of divergent invariants: motherhood as an institution and as an experience.

Therefore, as is the case with many feminist elaborations on motherhood, the conceptual framework of this analysis finds its basic premises in the work of Adrienne Rich's study *Of Woman Born*. The opening paragraphs introduce the main idea:

22 See also, Michelle Hughes Miller, Tamar Hager, and Rebecca Bromwich, eds., *Bad mothers: regulations, representations, and resistance* (Toronto: Demeter Pres, 2018).

23 Rey Chow, “Gender and Representation,” in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 38–58.

Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.²⁴

Adrienne Rich introduces a crucial conceptual distinction in what she sees as the hitherto conflated or unified notion of motherhood. By the term motherhood she denotes the institutional dimensions of motherhood: practices that are deeply oppressive for women, traditions under male domination, and represented (described) by men. On the other hand, described from a woman's perspective the term mothering denotes potentially empowering and women-centered practices.

[...] Rich's distinction between mothering and motherhood enabled feminists to realise that motherhood is not naturally, necessarily, or inevitably oppressive... Rather, mothering, freed from motherhood, could be experienced as a site of empowerment and social change if, to use Rich's words, women became "outlaws from the institution of motherhood."²⁵

In addition to the work of Adrienne Rich, another theoretical framework that expands and complements the initial distinction between motherhood and mothering is Sara Ruddick's concept of maternal thinking. Presented in her book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Ruddick elaborates on the practices of mothering as a substrate for Conceptualising, at least in intention, an ethical normative argument of how one behaves or is to behave if in the position of being a mother. At least two different components of Ruddick's argument should here be presented in more detail. The first posits the cognitive/rational aspect of maternal behavior.²⁶ All too often, the vast and various aspects of maternal practices have been subsumed under purely emotional or, more often, gender-specific innate reactions every woman is capable of performing. Ruddick's argumentation aims to dismantle this dangerous and misleading presumption by stressing the necessity of the mothering subject engaging in complex, cognitively, emotionally, and practically challenging tasks as well as in rigorous discipline. To be a mother requires more than a uterus.

Moreover, the uterus itself is no prerequisite for someone to be named by the name mother. That is to say, Sara Ruddick separates the notion of maternal both from what is usually called biological motherhood and from the female gender determinant in general. For her, being a mother is a position independent of any standard gender determinant. In other words, the terms mother and motherhood do not have to refer only to women. They function as topological terms and indicate a particular type of behavior.

Her argument resonates both in the elaboration of the philosophical concept of the ethics of care²⁷ as well as in the political science reflections on feminist theory of peace.²⁸ The broader impact of Ruddick's argument on maternal thinking as a form of general peace-driven comportment

24 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 13.

25 Andrea O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 3.

26 Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 24.

27 See for this important aspect: Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

28 See especially, Linda Martin Alcoff, "Rethinking maternal thinking," *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2003): 85–89; Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood"

comes to be of particular importance if considered within the above-described decorum of the novel under discussion. The unsettling and tense socio-political period of the mid-sixties in Western Europe, accompanied by the widespread disappointment in the leftist social solutions to come as a release for accumulated social frustration, shadow the motherhood/maternity practices represented in the novel. The analytic dialogue thus opens up on at least two levels, with the first the represented level of motherly practices performed by the literary characters, highly marked by the represented politically troublesome times. What sort of maternal thinking has to be in play in order to proceed with the child's upbringing in times of dramatically lowering the level of hope as a principle of social or personal functioning? The second aspect concerns different narrative motives such as war, security, safety and fear and how they are treated within the novel, especially in the light of the notion of maternal thinking or the "rationality of care."²⁹ Put differently, there are remarkable resemblances between the narrower novelistic depictions of maternal actions and the broader novelistic description of the social, and political climate status.

This opens up the analytic area for scrutinizing the given novelistic representation of the plausibility of more generally assumed leftist/feminist principles (of care). The fine line of socio-political subtext and context in the novel summons the generational broken dreams of social justice, and predicts the distrust in many, if not all, programmatic, social agendas in the future. Feminism is one of the emancipatory narratives of that time, a discourse which today shares the destiny of various other movements of identity politics. Regardless of Doris Lessing's rejection of feminism, feminist claims associated with the liberation of women from patriarchal constraints often find a place in readings of her work. Therefore, in this case, the third theoretical basis for the forthcoming analysis is the notion of "feminist mothering." Building on the arguments of her predecessors and overviewing recent mainstream discourses on motherhood, Andrea O'Reilly sets up an account of feminist mothering, "an oppositional discourse of motherhood, one that is constructed as a negation of patriarchal motherhood."³⁰ O'Reilly's elaborations and the main insights of the matrifocal feminist writings in Rich and Ruddick will support interpreting literary representations of maternal practices in Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook*. The proposed framework aims at fusing the contextual facticity encompassing the novel with its rich content. To be more precise, written in a chronological period with no affirmative feminist motherhood narratives, the novel reveals a matrifocal experience different from the traditional (patriarchal) understanding of how a mother's thoughts and life should seem. Furthermore, the novel's passages as a form of *avant-la-lettre* maternal thinking converge with Ruddick's insights on the maternal as cerebral and laborious.

Therefore, the contemporary theoretical account of feminist mothering is employed here to join the textual and extra-textual features of the novel. It can be assumed that this interplay of layers and perspectives on various content segments of the novel, and the realization of the particular motif of motherhood in the novel encourage its reading as feminist, even though Doris Lessing often rejected this label. The author's suspicion or skepticism when it comes to the "war of

in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 45–66.

29 Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 13–27.

30 O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*, 4.

the sexes”³¹ does not dismiss at the same stroke the novel’s openness for reading in keeping with feminist motherhood. In fact, the theme of motherhood in the novel is elaborated in accordance with feminist motherhood thought, and is also deeply affected by the general feminist stance toward motherhood typical for that period.

Maternal Thinking in *The Golden Notebook*

The novel offers an iteration of one of the most potent fears of motherhood – the death of a child. The co-heroine of the novel Molly has to face a suicide attempt by her son Tommy. The standard, culturally-based relationship between mother and son is presented in the novel as a series of conflicts, misunderstandings, and denials between the two characters. The mediatrix of the relationship between this novelistic pair is the novel’s other heroine Anna, herself the mother of a girl. The two women friends are co-mothers who share taking care of a young man-son (their joint centeredness on the girl is meagre, almost negligible) in a kind of *gynaeceum* motherhood. Their relationship is characterized by the women’s shared space of caring shaped not only by the fact of dual single motherhood but also by flirting with ideas of upbringing aimed at/towards freedom, or rather “feminist maternity” *avant la lettre*. Tommy’s mother fails to establish a parity relationship of trust, thus Anna enters the young man’s world as a communication channel between his mother and himself. Paragraphs of the novel shortly before Tommy shoots himself in the head inform the readers of the most recent conversation between the young man and Anna on topics that matter to him: fashioning himself in writing as well as in the world, morality, struggles and fears that he can or should write about, and which can or should be admitted or lived with. Tommy, a young man in an “identity crisis of teenage years,” surreptitiously reads Anna’s – the free woman’s – notebooks. In Anna’s notebooks, he discovers and later declares her hypocrisy, her fear, not so different from anyone else’s fears.

Namely, Tommy is brought up to believe that the ideas endorsed by his mother and Anna differ significantly from all of the conventional bourgeois values and beliefs, represented by his father, a corporate manager. The turning point for the young man is a moment of understanding that Anna’s life is strikingly similar to the life of his father: “After all, you take your stand on something, do not you? Yes you do – you despise people like my father who limit themselves. But you limit yourself too. For the same reason. You’re afraid. You’re being irresponsible.”³²

The insight Tommy gains upsets him deeply, and within the space of a few passages, he has shot himself. At the level of narrative composition, the cliffhanger sentence: “Tommy was not dead but was expected to die before morning”³³ is followed by approximately a hundred pages entitled “The Notebooks”. “The Notebooks” contain no information on Tommy’s destiny, so the life-or-death (maternal) fear overshadows a large part of the novel.

The heroines’ fear for the young man’s life thus becomes the tension and the anxiety of the narrative, and the reader cannot get rid of it so easily and quickly. Fear of some kind of fatal

31 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 8.

32 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 310.

33 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 318.

outcome ossifies even in those places in the novel where Tommy's potential death is not directly addressed. On top of all others fears, the fear in question becomes the mainframe or tone of understanding the narrative. However, Tommy's attempt remains just that. The young man survives and there is no more fear, but the self-inflicted head wound results in the young man's permanent blindness. Blindness, which renders a boy in crisis – raised by a single, feminist mother, and her female friend – into someone who is, according to his mother's description, "[...] happy for the first time in his life [...] he's all in one piece for the first time in his life."³⁴

Critics have noticed that "blindness and mutilation do not, as one might expect, signify castration. Instead, they become the preconditions for attaining phallic power."³⁵ In other words, "[b]y blinding himself, Tommy escapes the influence of the women who nurtured him and qualifies himself to succeed his father as 'husband' to his father's alcoholic second wife and as head of his corporate empire."³⁶ The "phallogocentric delusion" which has not escaped the feminist readings of the novel³⁷ puts the ball of fear into the court of motherhood again. The resolution of the fear merely reshapes this algorithm into a slightly curved trajectory – that of the fear of the failures of motherhood – all of the motherhood failures, even the feminist motherhood ones.

In her quite functional classification, Andrea O'Reilly has systematized some maternal practice in order to name it feminist. (1) It should empower women who perform it; (2) it should transform both the patriarchal role of motherhood and that of childrearing; (3) it should display the conscious idea of mothering as culturally significant and politically purposeful; (4) empowered mothers do not always put their children's needs before their own, nor do they only look to motherhood to define and realised their identity; (5) the involvement of the co-mothers or other mothers in the mothering process is encouraged; (6) a mother whose mothering is shaped and influenced by feminism.³⁸

In contrast to feminist mothering stands a patriarchal model of motherhood, characterized by eight elements. They are:

- (1) children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother;
- (2) this mothering must be provided 24/7;
- (3) the mother must always put her children's needs before her own;
- (4) mothers must turn to experts for instruction;
- (5) the mother must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood;
- (6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children;
- (7) the mother has full responsibility, but no power from which to mother;
- (8) motherwork, and childrearing more specifically, are regarded as personal, private undertakings with no political import.³⁹

Returning to the novel, that is, the selected aspect of the relationship between the characters addressed in the analysis so far, the principle that stands out is that relating to number (2) from

34 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 413.

35 Patrocino Schweichart, "What are we doing, Really? Feminist Criticism and the Problem of Theory," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale* 9, no. 1 (1985): 148.

36 Schweichart, "What are we doing, Really?," 148.

37 See, especially, Hajer Elarem, "A quest for selfhood: deconstructing and reconstructing female identity in Doris Lessing's early fiction" (PhD diss., Université de Franche-Comté, 2015).

38 O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*, 5–9.

39 O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*, 10.

the feminist mothering script: it should transform both the patriarchal role of motherhood and that of childrearing. It should transform, in other words, the visions of the naturalness of a selfless, self-renouncing and utterly unconditional motherly love that is supposed to be instinctive and inherent to every woman. The situation that interests us is consequently the one that touches the relationship of the mother Molly with the (over)grown child, young Tommy. The sense of fear defines this situation. Molly is frightened and instinctively reacts in the same manner every time her son is nearby. The situations she experiences as threatening, even the very thought of Tommy's closeness, are already tormenting for her.

The described scenery is crucial here because such an established relationship between the mother and the son appears at the particular point when the young man wounds himself, which results in permanent self-mutilation. By maiming, blinding and losing a part of himself, the boy becomes fragmented; the unity/integrity which he had previously possessed is lost, becoming divided. However, precisely through fragmentation, unity is (re)established: Molly describes him as "all in one piece for the first time in his life."⁴⁰

The relationship between fragmentation and unity, a theme which in the novel is continuously perpetuated in various mirroring relationships, encompasses the young man's aforesaid transition from the motherly world (of Molly and Anna) to the fatherly world of high society and business. This transition involves the rejection of the entire previous system of values, i.e. the breakdown of the whole educational project whose principles correspond to number (6) in the list of the principles of feminist mothering: a mother whose mothering is shaped and influenced by feminism, that is, if feminism is understood as a movement with the aim of challenging social inequity in all of its manifestations.

Although raised in the libertarian spirit of left-minded intellectuals marked by a revolutionary habitus, the young man decides to make a radical turnaround. His trajectory starts from an enthusiastic vision of a child growing into a young man who will be capable of independently making decisions which will in turn lead to some sort of a "better world," only to end up in the figure of a not very "reactionary and non-progressive"⁴¹ businessman, as is his father. The son's idea of changing the world will proceed "through the efforts of big business and by putting pressure on the ministries."⁴²

It is not difficult to understand the relationship between the general, individual, political/personal, micro and macro levels. The downfall of the communist myth mirrors the downfall of the educational project, while the general sense of disheartenment and hopelessness echoes a sense of miscarriage and failure of motherhood. The "breakdown" and "rupture" of the world equates to that of an individual, and, returning to close the circle: reintegration/reunification in "blindness." These parallels are constantly repeated and multiplied.

Tommy's choice of method to establish personal integration will be repeated at the end of the novel through the choices of both protagonists: Molly – a free woman – by entering into marriage, and Anna – a communist activist and a writer – by entering the Labour Party and

40 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 413.

41 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 702.

42 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 702.

foregoing writing. In the words of *The Golden Notebook*, “So we’re both going to be integrated with British life as it roots.’ [Molly says]. ‘I have carefully avoided that tone.’ [Anna replies to Molly].”⁴³ However, Anna’s tone of veiled irony (the ironic detachment from reality) is an enabling feature of social integration. She refuses to go without resistance, which would hinder the complete slipping into deindividualisation, alienation and absolute fear, as the absence of resistance is what invokes in Molly fear of her son – the “new” dividedly-unified Tommy. She fears the son who will understand his blindness as an opportunity to become a new man: an adult, independent individual and well-integrated into society. She fears his focused, carefully elaborated self-fashioning into a desirable socially structured individual who is efficient, functional and correct: decent and polite. All of this is what causes Molly to panic, to be disturbed, to feel infirm, helpless, guilty, and completely disoriented. She continuously asks herself if she could or even should help her son – is she is doing something wrong, something which is terrible for Tommy (although she does not yet know what that bad thing could be) or is this actually bad for him?

Molly’s state of motherhood is a state of forced isolation: passivity. It is the condition in which an experience of motherly connectedness with the child is completely lost under patriarchal control. This state coincides with the complete destruction of the illusion of the possibility of escaping from patriarchal control.

Concluding remarks

To narrate and detect the modalities of motherhood is a demanding task, for even the notion of motherhood is a contested term. This feature becomes especially prominent if motherhood is to be monitored as immersed into the patriarchal setting, as is broadly presented in the case of Lessing’s novel. In their attempt to emancipate themselves from the constraints of the particular historical period, the two women strive to become free, or at least to not become determined by the context they live in. Fear, however, as the emotion coming to the fore of the narrative, delimits the principles of freedom so eagerly advocated by the two female characters. Moreover, fear cuts through many (if not all) of the narrative threads, and in that respect, it is similar to motherhood. In addition, the relationality of motherhood provides a multi-layered context, connecting various threads of the social, political, intimate and professional life of the characters into an inextricable net of (narrative) effects. The relational nature of motherhood, merged with the notion of fear, results in a devastating narrative world of stasis and impossibility (for all the novel’s characters, but especially so for the two mothers/friends). The unsurmountable difficulty that the notion of motherhood represents for the two female characters goes hand in hand with the overall sense of exhaustion, lethargy, crisis, destruction and distress. Therefore, the notion of motherhood in Doris Lessing’s novel *The Golden Notebook* does not reach the level of an emancipatory concept, and this fact is in complete accordance with feminist stances on the topic of motherhood at the time when the novel was published. Differently put, Lessing’s renunciation of feminism, if analysed through the concept of motherhood, is less an act of conscious renunciation but more an act of creatively expressing an image of matriphobia as a critical feminist stance towards motherhood at

43 Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 703.

that specific historical moment. At least in that respect, her writing on motherhood is in resonance with feminist thought of that period.

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